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ABSTRACT

A study examined the role of the mass media in the symbolization process (a process which was necessary to distract attention from the political and economic problems of the European Community and to enhance support of the powerless parliament) during the European election campaign of 1984 and whether symbolization strengthened the motivation for voting. Subjects, 1,413 individuals representative of the West German electorate, were surveyed and interviewed in three waves preceding the election and one wave after the election concerning their views on the election. Results indicated that (1) Euro-specific political or entertaining television programs played a significant role in the symbolization process: (2) the media's impact on voting intervention was mainly mediated through the attitudes towards a "United Europe" and the European Parliament; and (3) a greater influence on the symbolization process was assigned to television during the campaign. (Five tables of data are included.) (RS)

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How to Sell a Powerless Parliament - Symbolic Politics During the European Election Campaign

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How to Sell a Powerless Parliament - Symbolic Politics During the European Election Campaign 1984

Abstract:

This paper examines the role of the mass media in the symbolization process during the European election campaign in 1984 and whether symbolization strengthened the motivation for voting. Symbolization is determined to be necessary in order to distract attention from the political and economic problems of the European Community and to enhance the public's support of the powerless parliament.

The analysis of West German survey data shows a significant role of Euro-specific political or entertaining TV programs in the symbolization process. The media's impact on voting intention proves to be mainly mediated through the attitudes towards a "United Europe" and the European Parliament. A greater influence on symbolization during the election campaign is assigned to television.

Complex political systems are based on the diffuse support of their citizens. Diffuse support - as defined by David EASTON (1979) - is a general and long-term attitude towards the system, a "reservoir of good-will" for politicians and political institutions. It is a kind of general trust, mainly independent of everyday politics, which helps the citizen also to accept those actions and decisions of the political system which do not meet the individual expectations.

The basis for general trust is the conviction that the system, its institutions and its politicians are legitimate, as well as the belief in a common interest.

Modern political systems are confronted with increasing pressure of differentiated, often opposing expectations of their members; at the same time the allocation of goods has become more difficult because of limited resources. As the solution of political problems is time-consuming and difficult, political decisions cannot be found quickly and satisfying for everyone, which raises the system's need for legitimation. Therefore the system must seek legitimation also in advance of political decisions.

The political system - foremost the government - uses active public relations to assure public support: With its public relations strategies the system mediates the impression of a transparent decision process, of individual political efficacy, tries to set the political agenda and demonstrates its competence. The demonstration of the system's responsiveness is to give the individual citizen the feeling that his interests are taken into consideration.

As well as the the pretended transparency of the system,

the demonstration of competence by politicians and political institutions enhances public trust. To set the political agenda allows to draw public attention to special issues and the system's standpoint and at the same time can be used to distract attention from other political problems.

For its public relations the political system is dependent on the mass media which it therefore tries to instrumentalize either by influencing the mass media system, by adopting journalistic selection criteria, or the creation "media events".

Symbolization is a characteristic of what altogether can be called political communication management. Symbols replace the solution of problems, because solutions are more and more difficult to find.

Political parties which no longer address specific social groups but strive to gain as many voters as possible today almost cannot be differentiated. Instead of party differences on political issues symbolization is sought to bring about distinctiveness. Murray EDELMAN who has analyzed the strategies of symbolic politics points out that symbolization also responds to a need of the people: Alienation and a loss of orientation characterize modern industrial societies resulting in a feeling of uncertainty and thus in a search for symbols and rituals because they enable guidance and identification (1976, p. 58/59).

As elections decide about the power maintenance of political parties and politicians, election campaigns are a hot phase of political communication management and symbolization. This study also concentrates on this aspect and analyzes the campaign of the second election

of the European Parliament in 1984. We will ask whether the election campaign was apt to enhance general trust and loyalty among the voters, and which was the mass media's part in this process.

The election of the European Parliament[1)] is an examplary case of symbolic politics. With its lack of competence the parliament itself is a symbol of the European Community. Being without any executice or legislative power the parliament only has few opportunities to demonstrate its achievements and so depends on symbolic politics in a particular way.

Because the European election does not decide about the composition of a government, voters must be given another motivation to participate in the election. Symbolization therefore should play a decisive role for the motivation to cast the ballot.

The research question

To analyze the efficieny of political communication management in the 1984 European election campaign research here will be guided by the following questions:

- Did the campaign succeed in distracting attention from the everyday problems of the European Community and instead gaining attention for the political aim of a "United Europe"?

- Did it succeed in putting "European Unity" on the political agenda of the public?

- Did the campaign succeed in enhancing the people's trust in the European Parliament?

- If the campaign succeeded in symbolization, did it contribute to the motivation to cast the vote in the election?

Our attention focuses on the role of the mass media in the symbolization process. On the one hand, the campaign depends on the mass media, on the other hand the media should be most effective in symbolization. Especially television with its shortness of time and forced to depict even abstract political processes tends to ritualization and thus should play a decisive role in symbolization.

The data

The data reported in this paper derive from a four-wave panel survey representative of the West German electorate (N1 = 1413). Hour-long personal interviews were conducted in 1984, three waves before the election of the European Parliament on June 17 (February, April, June) and one wave after election date (July).

The findings

A "United Europe" as an issue on the political agenda

In general, Europe does not have high priority among the most important issues German politicians should deal with. Among eleven topics European politics altogether ranked ninth in the first panel wave (February 1984) four months before the election and reached position three just before election date (June 1984). When analyzed in detail, it becomes clear that the main cause for the ameliorated position is the salience of the election

itself, which gains more and more attention in the course of the campaign (HOLTZ-BACHA 1988b).

When asked for the most important issues of the election campaign, most people name "European Unity" while economic problems which usually are first associated with the European Community rank low. In the second wave when the question was asked for the first time (April 1984) 19 percent of the respondents call the "United Europe" a priority topic of the campaign. The percentage raises to 43 in June just before election day.

The political aim of the European Community to create a united Europe here is used as an indicator of symbolization. To find out which factors have contributed to the raise of the issue during the election campaign multiple regression analysis is applied. As dependent variable in the regression we use "European Unity named as an important issue of the campaign" (June). The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
about here

In the first step we introduce age and education as the most important sociodemographic characteristics. Age stands for different socialization and professional experiences; education and political interest, which is entered in the second step, represent a political schema, which facilitates the incorporation of new informations in a political framework.

Controlling for the April answer concerning the most important issue of the election campaign allows to tell

the influence of the other independent variables on the change in perception between the run up phase of the campaign and election day: A positive beta coefficient indicates symbolization (= "European Unity" named in June), a negative sign shows that the campaign did not succeed in symbolization (= "European Unity" not named in June).

Among the characteristics of media use we introduce indicators of habitual as well as Euro-specific exposure. Habitual media exposure here includes the use of a local newspaper, exposure to political print media (national daily or weekly newspapers or political magazines), exposure to TV news, and exposure to public affairs programs on TV. Euro-specific programs were cast on TV during the election campaign. These were programs dealing with European political issues (= exposure to Euro-specific political programs) or entertaining programs including a European aspect (= exposure to Euro-specific entertaining programs). The Euro-specific programs were produced by the TV stations themselves and do not include party spots.

In the last step, we use two attention variables: Respondents were asked whether they had noticed anything about the European election in newspapers, journals, in the news (TV), or any advertising. Recent research has demonstrated that attention measures in addition to traditional media exposure variables have predictive power for knowledge gain (see e.g. CHAFFEE/SCHLEUDER 1986).

The results of the analysis as presented in Table 1 do not reveal any significant impact of habitual media exposure though the media use variables altogether explain two thirds of the (explained) variance in the

perception of the campaign. Euro-specific media exposure here appears to be more important: Respondents who watched political TV programs concerning the European Community during the campaign name a "United Europe" as a salient issue of the election campaign. This relationship might be due to the attention given to "Euro-visions" on TV in 1984[2].

Table 1 also shows a significant relation between the campaign attention scale (April) and the dependent variable: People who were attentive to the campaign in its early beginning more than others name "European Unity" as an important issue while attention to the campaign it its hot phase (June) is not related to the dependent variable. Again results of content analysis can be used for interpretation: An analysis of German quality papers in the first six months of 1984 has shown that European matters were treated more between January and March than during the last three months before election date (SCHULZ 1988). Though the reporting on Europe in the newspapers was more concerned with the (economic) problems of the European Community, it seems to have raised attention for Europe in general.

Associations with Europe

A question eliciting the spontaneous associations with the European Community also can serve as an indicator of symbolization during the election campaign. This question was included twice in the panel study, once in February before the campaign and again in June just before the election, and thus allows to tell whether symbolization was effective: If there is an increase in the association of poltical aims with the European Community and/or a decline in the association of economic and political

problems, symbolization has taken place.

A comparison of the answers given in the first and in the third panel wave (February - June) again supports our hypothesis that symbolic politics played an important role in the election campaign: The association of political aims (e.g. international understanding) with the European Community raised from 14 to 21 percent while answers concerning economic aims or problems fell 8 resp. 6 percent (25 : 17%; 24 : 18% February - June).

We apply discriminant analysis to find out which factors have influenced the tendency towards "Euro-visions". The discrimination function here seperates two groups: Respondents who associated political aims with the European Community in June but not in February, and - in contrast - respondents who did not change their association to political aims. Table 2 presents the results of the analysis and shows whether and how the (independent) variables contribute to the discrimination of the two groups. A positive sign of the discrimination coefficient (which shows the strength of the relationship) stands for a change of the association towards political aims in the course of the election campaign. Positive signs thus indicate an influence on symbolization. A negative sign of the beta coefficent tells that no change in the European Community association has taken place.

Table 2
about here

In addition to the independent variables which were used for the regression analysis presented in Table 1 a scale representing "knowledge about the EC" is introduced here.

It is hypothesized that respondents who are well informed about the Community and thus are familiar with its political and economic problems should tend to associate the difficulties of the Community first and are more reticent about the political aims.

Education here contributes most to the discrimination of the two groups: Better educated respondents developed their associations to the political aim of a "United Europe". The relationship for the politically interested and those who know more than others about the EC is inverse. The assumption that this result may be due to a ceiling-effect - which means: these respondents already in February associated political aims and therefore could not improve their answer - proved to be wrong. Thus, it can be concluded that respondents with a political interest and with a good knowledge of the European Community tend to associate its problems first.

Among the media use variables exposure to Euro-specific entertaining programs on TV contributes most to the discrimination. Respondents who watched these programs change their associations with the EC during the campaign to "Euro-visions".

Trust in the European Parliament

In the next step of our study we analyze whether the election campaign was effective in enhancing people's trust in the European Parliament, thus bringing people closer to the symbol of the European Community.

As an indicator of trust or diffuse support we construct a scale which combines six items:

1. The European Parliament should have more influence.
2. The European Parliament is without any relevance for my everyday life.
3. I hardly know what the members of the European Parliament really do.
4. Since the European Parliament is elected by the people there is new hope for a united Europe.
5. The European Parliament costs a lot of money and is of no use.
6. The European Parliament is the only political institution which is respected in Europe.

A high rank on the scale stands for high trust, a low rank means distrust in the European Parliament. The item list was included in all four panel waves[3)] which allows to analyze whether a change in trust has taken place and by which factors it was influenced.

In order to find out whether and how the election campaign succeeded in enhancing the public's trust in the European Parliament a new variable is constructed which is called "pre-electoral change of trust": On this behalf the February rank on the trust scale is substracted from the June rank. Negative values stand for a raise of distrust, positive values show an increase in trust during the campaign. The new scale is used as dependent variable in a multiple regression analysis, Table 3 presents its results.

Table 3
about here

Among the indepedendent variables we also control for general political alienation[4)] to make sure that distrust in the European Parliament is something else than just an expression of a general distrust in politics. In addition to the already known media exposure variables we introduce the use of entertaining print media and TV programs which proved to be related to general political alienation in previous analyses (HOLTZ-BACHA 1988a). A scale measuring attention to news on the European Parliament in the media is entered instead of the earlier used EC attention variable.

The results of the regression analysis which are presented in Table 3 show that Euro-specific TV programs have reached their aim: Exposure to entertaining and to political programs concerning European topics is positively related with a raise in trust during the election campaign. Among the variables of habitual media use, only exposure to entertaining TV programs is significantly connected with a change in trust: Respondents who use to watch entertaining TV programs show an increase of distrust in the European Parliament between February and June.

General political alienation which is significantly related to trust in February even if other variables are controlled does not yield any influence on trust in June.

Symbolization and the voting intention

In 1979, 65.7 percent of the German electorate voted in the first direct election of the European Parliament. In 1984, voter turnout dropped 8.9 percent. Compared to German national elections with a turnout of at least 80 percent participation in the European elections must be

called rather low. It is therefore a priority aim of the campaign to strengthen the motivation for voting.

After we have seen that the election campaign succeeded in symbolization we will now ask whether and how symbolization contributed to the motivation for voting.

Being without any (national) consequences the election mainly has symbolic character. Therefore and because a negative attitude towards the European Parliament only can be expressed through abstention the tendency not to vote in the European election is higher than in national elections which influence the constitution of a government.

Distracting attention from the economic and political problems and attributing a meaning to the European Community through symbolization should enhance the motivation for voting. Thus it is expected that trust in the European Parliament and a high priority of "Eurovisions" on the political agenda show a positive relationship to voting intention: People who believe in a united Europe should be more willing than others to strengthen the EP as a symbol of European unity.

To test the hypothesis we use voting intention in June as a dependent variable in a regression analysis which follows the already known model. As we also control for voting intention in February we analyze which factors contributed to an amelioration of voting intention during the campaign.

In addition, two variables indicating the salience of a European unity as a campaign issue are entered: "Named the issue in April" and "named the issue in June, but not in April".

Table 4
about here

The results of the regression analysis which are presented in Table 4 clearly support the assumption of a positive relation between the salience of "European Unity" as a campaign issue and the motivation to cast the ballot. Thus, we can conclude that symbolization goes hand in hand with an amelioration of voting intention.

As symbolization has proved to be connected with media use, particularly with the exposure to political Euro-specific TV programs, we can assume that there is an indirect relation between media exposure and voting intention through symbolization. Moreover, Table 4 also shows direct relations between media use and the intention to participate in the election: Exposure to political TV programs as well as consumption of entertaining Euro-specific TV programs strengthen the motivation for voting.

The regression analysis presented in Table 5 clearly supports the relationship of symbolization to voting intention.

Table 5
about here

High trust in the European Parliament and the increase of trust during the election campaign are strongly connected with the dependent variable. The influence of media

exposure this time is mainly absorbed by the attitudes towards the European Parliament. Attention to European matters has played a significant role for symbolization (Table 1 and 2) and moreover is directly related to voting intention (Table 4 and 5). In any case attention has added considerably to the explanation of variance in the dependent variables.

Summary and conclusions

We used two indicators - salience of "European Unity" as a campaign issue and trust in the European Parliament- to study whether political communication management during the European election campaign in 1984 succeeded in symbolization. Symbolization was determined to be neccessary in order to distract attention from the political and economic problems of the European Community and to enhance the public's support of a powerless parliament. It was hypothesized that the mass media play an important role in the symbolization process.

On the whole, it can be concluded that symbolization has taken place during the campaign. The election, itself being a step to political unity, has contributed considerably to an increase in the salience of the political aims of the European Community.

Habitual mass media use altogether has proved to be influential for the promotion of the "European Unity" as a campaign issue. But here we can not assign a significant role to either television or the print media. Instead, a clear relationship between an increase in the salience of the topic and exposure to Euro-specific TV programs concerning political aspects of the European Community could be shown.

As another indicator for the analysis of the symbolization process we chose diffuse support, represented by "trust in the European Parliament". Diffuse support is a basis for the legitimation of a political institution and is particularly connected with symbolization in complex political systems.

The data reveal an increase in trust during the election campaign. Low trust in the European Parliament is related to general political alienation which means that respondents who distrust the political system anyway also include the European Community and its institutions.

It is again exposure to political Euro-specific TV programs which contributes significantly to an increase in trust in the European Parliament while the consumption of entertaining TV programs (in general) is negatively correlated with trust.

At last, we have analyzed whether symbolization had an influence on voting intention. Enhancing the motivation to cast the ballot is crucial for the election campaign because the European Parliament with its lack of influence hardly is more than just a symbol of the future political unity of the European Community. Indeed we have found that respondents with low trust in the European Parliament tend to non-voting. Those who have a more positive attitude towards the parliament and are aware of its role for the individual citizen are more inclined to vote in the election. The raise of "European Unity" on the respondents' political agenda also contributes to voting intention.

The connection of mass media exposure and voting intention is mainly mediated by these attitudes. Besides there is a direct relationship between the motivation to vote

in the European election and exposure to political TV programs as well as exposure to Euro-specific TV programs with entertaining content.

In summarizing the findings on the role of the mass media for symbolization television here can be ascribed a greater influence than the print media. Particularly, Euro-specific programs during the campaign have reached their aim and mediated by the attitudes had an impact on voting intention. However, low voter turnout in the European election raises the question whether television could have done even more to motivate for voting. These doubts about the effort of television during the campaign is further supported by the findings of content analysis which have demonstrated that the stations in 1984 have devoted less time to the election than in 1979 (SCHULZ 1988).

The less influential role shown for the print media might be due to several reasons. On the one hand, the Euro-specific TV programs could be included because they were cast by the two national channels which existed in 1984 (ARD, ZDF). But because of the diversity of German newspapers and journals special editions or extensive reporting on the European Community and the election could not be considered in detail. Moreover, to determine the impact of a single newspaper it would be necessary to know which (local) newspaper is read by the the individual respondent. Exposure to print media therefore could only be represented by more general variables as the regular reading of a local newspaper and exposure to the national newspapers or weekly magazines. So, differences in the operationalization of the media use variables might be responsable for the results which ascribe a more influential role to television.

On the other hand, a greater impact of television here is more likely because it seems to be the more adequate medium for symbolization: The force to depict abstract political processes fosters the ritualization of politics (see e.g. EDELMAN 1976; TEICHERT 1987). In addition, politicians and parties adapt their election campaigns to the rules of television and at the same time try to influence the medium more or less directly. Taking this into consideration, it nevertheless seems to be justified to conclude from the results that in the symbolization process during the European election campaign in 1984 television (in contrast to the print media) proved to be the more influential medium.

Notes

1) Since 1979 the European Parliament is directly elected by the people of the states belonging to the European Community. Each state takes a fixed number of seats, so the vote only decides about the distribution of the seats among the parties.

2) The term "Euro-visions" here is used as a synonym of the political (ideological) aims of the European Community as for example a "United Europe" or "European Cooperation" (on the role of Euro-visions also see SCHULZ 1983).

3) Reliability coefficients:
alpha 1. wave .68
alpha 2. wave .66
alpha 3. wave .63
alpha 4. wave .63

4) The alienation scale consists of items concerning individual political efficacy and the image of politicians.

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Table 1

"European Unity" as an issue of the election campaign

Stepwise regression
Dependent variable: "European Unity" named as an important issue of the campaign (June)

Step	beta
1. Sociodemographic Characteristics:	
Age	-.04
Education	.02
2. Political Interest	-.04
3. "European Unity" named as an important issue of the campaign (April)	.09**
4. Media Exposure:	
Reading the local newspaper regularly	.02
Exposure to political print media	.04
Exposure to TV news	.05
Exposure to political TV programs	.03
5. Euro-Specific TV Exposure:	
Exposure to political programs	.12**
Exposure to entertaining programs	-.02
6. Attention:	
Noticed something about the election in the media (April)	.08*
Noticed something about the election in the media (June)	.06

** p < / = .05 $*_2$ = .06
multiple R = .25 R^2 = .06
pairwise deletion of missing values, n = 631 - 705

Table 2

Change to the association of political aims with the EC (June)

Discriminant analysis
Discrimination of respondents who associated political aims with the EC in June but not in February, and respondents who did not change their associations

	Standardized discrimination coefficients absolute	relative %
Age	-.21	6.5
Education	.78	24.1
Political interest	-.30	9.3
Knowledge about the EC	-.30	9.3
Reading the local newspaper regularly	.01	0.3
Exposure to political print media	-.32	9.9
Exposure to political TV programs	-.15	4.6
Exposure to TV news	.24	7.4
Exposure to Euro-specific political programs (TV)	.09	2.8
Exposure to Euro-specific entert. programs (TV)	.50	15.5
Noticed something about the election in the media (April)	.26	8.0
Noticed something about the election in the media (June)	.07	2.2
		99.9

n = 522 CR = .26

Table 3

Raise of trust/distrust in the European Parliament between February and June 1984

Stepwise regression
Dependent variable: Pre-electoral change of trust in the EP

Step	beta
1. Trust in the EP (February)	.66**
2. Sociodemographic Characteristics:	
Age	.04
Education	.10**
3. Political Interest	-.01
Political Alienation	-.05
4. Media Exposure:	
Reading the local newspaper regularly	-.06
Exposure to political print media	.03
Exposure to entertaining print media	-.01
Exposure to TV news	-.02
Exposure to political TV programs	-.01
Exposure to entertaining TV programs	-.07*
5. Euro-Specific TV Exposure:	
Exposure to political programs	.09**
Exposure to entertaining programs	.06
6. Noticed something about the EP in the media	.07**

** p < / =.05 * p = .07
multiple R = .65 R^2 = .43
pairwise deletion of missing values, n = 601 - 762

Table 4

Salience of "European Unity" as an issue of the election campaign and voting intention

Stepwise regression
Dependent variable: Voting intention (June)

Step	beta
1. Voting intention in February	-.28**
2. Sociodemographic Characteristics:	
Age	-.02
Education	.06
3. Political Interest	-.03
4. "European Unity" as an important campaign issue -	
- named in April	.12**
- named in June, but not in April	.12**
5. Media Exposure:	
Reading the local newspaper regularly	-.03
Exposure to political print media	-.01
Exposure to entertaining print media	.01
Exposure to TV news	-.04
Exposure to political TV programs	.09**
Exposure to entertaining TV programs	-.03
6. Euro-Specific TV Exposure:	
Exposure to political programs	.07
Exposure to entertaining programs	.08*
7. Noticed something about the EP in the media	.21**

** p < / = .05 * p = .06
multiple R = .47 R^2 = .22
pairwise deletion of missing values, n = 566 - 705

Table 5

Trust in the EP and voting intention

Stepwise regression
Dependent variable: Voting intention (June)

Step	beta
1. Voting intention in February	-.23*
2. Sociodemographic Characteristics:	
Age	-.02
Education	.01
3. Political Interest	-.02
Political Alienation	-.03
4. Trust in the EP (February)	.36*
Increase in trust (February - June)	.33*
5. Media Exposure:	
Reading the local newspaper regularly	-.01
Exposure to political print media	-.02
Exposure to entertaining print media	.03
Exposure to TV news	-.03
Exposure to political TV programs	.07
Exposure to entertaining TV programs	-.02
6. Euro-Specific TV Exposure:	
Exposure to political programs	.06
Exposure to entertaining programs	.05
7. Noticed something about the EP in the media	.20*

** p < / = .01
multiple R = .54 R^2 = .29
pairwise deletion of missing values, n = 566 - 701